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More eyes, different eyes

Donna Leishman, Glasgow School of Art

Abstract

In this article I survey the current status quo in UK illustration education, and argue the case for a pragmatic and culturally porous approach to theory within illustration education. The pragmatic approach allows illustrators to see themselves as a form of social scientist, ethno/anthropologist, community activist or facilitator for change – a constructive move that directly mirrors broader diffuse changes in the design sector. The article ends by discussing notions such as the ‘public intellectual’ and ‘perspectival seeing,’ and concludes that as an international discipline the illustration community can offer much-needed new discourse and perspectives.

Keywords

pedagogy

United Kingdom

education

illustration

multi-disciplinary

socially engaged practice

digital media

Opening stance

During my academic and professional career, I have developed a close relationship with theoretical research and have used it both within project work and to develop curricula. I write as a maker, lecturer and lead of subject area in my current academic role as of Head of Communication Design at the Glasgow School of Art – overseeing both our undergraduate and two Masters programmes. Before this I was Head of Illustration at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design (Dundee, Scotland). In this article I will survey the current status quo in UK illustration education, and then argue the case for a pragmatic and culturally porous approach to theory within illustration education.

Context

It is my observation as an illustration-based academic that over the last two decades the higher education of illustration within the United Kingdom has primarily moved away from the acquisition of practical skills towards an offering that seeks to integrate or 'balance' theory and studio practice. This move was in part instigated by benchmarks set by the British Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which resulted in modern degree programmes seeking to unite a solid understanding of the theories that illustration is built upon with the key motor and creative skills required of practice.

I have found that how British institutions approach and address this for illustration is distinctly varied due to complex ideological, organizational and hierarchical issues. For example, in many institutions there remains to this day a

sense of an old divide rooted somewhat by a consensus that, as a discipline, illustration (like graphic design) arose from an 'applied arts'¹ context, in which the creative production was valued in terms of mastery of materials that resulted in a professional image that, unlike artistic practice, is not primed as a provocation for discourse. This is often supported by a belief that commercial practice requires only a technical/vocational training.²

This process, for some, is diametrically opposed to that which might be categorized as an academic, intellectual or theoretical training. This divide has in my experience become further problematized around lack of consensus on what the adjective 'academic' means and/or *should mean* in the creative education sector more broadly.

Within the United Kingdom, the proliferation of the post-1992 'modern' universities,³ where polytechnics were granted the power to award their own 'academic' degrees by virtue of demonstrable research prowess, birthed another scepticism – that of faux or overly overreaching academic courses to legitimize the once-vocational programmes. However, within the same two decades we have also witnessed an increase in practice-led postgraduate and doctoral studies, a clear indicator of scholarly appetite within the graduate illustration base. This has in turn changed and enriched the academic field via skill sets within the lecturing staff, which fosters an (often innovative) integration of theory and practice.

Examples of this include the book *Dear* (2010) by Dr Stephanie Black (currently teaching illustration at the University of Plymouth), which uses inductive research as a method to creatively resolve and conclude production. This process is detailed within her doctoral thesis (Black 2014: 67) and is also

featured in the second edition of Alan Male's *Illustration: A Theoretical Contextual Perspective* (2017). A different type of integration can be seen in Dr Catrin Morgan's and Steve Braund's programming of the annual Open Forum at Falmouth University, which features the teaching team's academic collaboration with their MA Illustration: Authorial Practice students, who undertake a publication design and are invited to present their reflections on the forum theme (in any manner that they feel appropriate). Meanwhile, Dr Damon Herd (2013) conceived of the Dundee Comics/Arts/Performance (DeeCAP) (Figure 1) event series for performance comics during his Ph.D. studies as a way for an audience to experience comics in a very different environment from the usual solitary reading of strips in books or tablets – and this is now an open creative community event held in Dundee. Finally, initiatives such as Confia, ICON, Mokita, the Illustration Research Network and (the currently on hiatus), Varoomlab all provide further integrated theory and practice discussion and review 'spaces' for the illustration research and professional practice worlds (Appendix A).

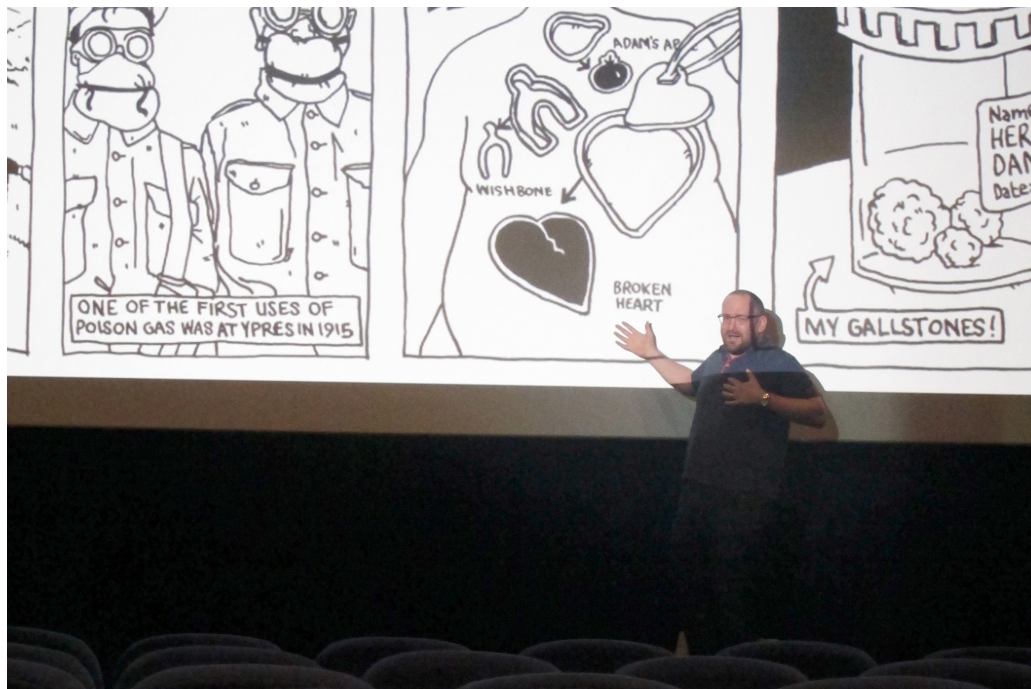


Figure 1: Dr Damon Herd performing one of his comics in 2013. The Dundee Comics/Arts/Performance

(DeeCAP) is a community where performers, writers and musicians bring their strips to life with live

interaction alongside a visual slideshow. See: <http://www.damonherd.com/deecap>.

Image credit: Valentina Bonizzi.

A theoretical turn?

To those on the outside of illustration as a formal educational discipline and those within more established academic subject areas, this kind of discussion may seem overdone or redundant, but it belies the complexity required in demarcating a set of principles and then the intricacy of decision-making in designing a contemporary sustainable illustration degree programme. For example: before the interjection of theory into an illustration programme, the traditional mainstay component to complement the practical skills was a course to provide a sense of discipline history. Herein lay the first hurdle for universities – demarcating the appropriate historical terrain for illustration. Arguably, pre-millennium design practices followed clearer lay-lines along

skill/craft and production industries, which led to either a narrow approach that inculcated a sense of fixed historical specialism in which illustration students only look at the origins and history of illustration (as subjectively determined), or a wider approach (often based on teaching efficiencies and available expertise) that results in a broader design history with a gamut of industrial and stylistic movements in different design disciplines. In the latter, illustration is contextually presented alongside graphic design, glass, ceramics, textiles, fashion, jewellery, interiors and product design.

There are benefits and drawbacks inherent in both models. Increasing sector value in multi-disciplinary studies has meant that the multi-discipline design history model tends to be more dominant, but this approach often does not show the concurrent histories in artistic practice occurring within fine art, which, given both the expressive content and the formal properties of image making, would provide more relevant context for the student illustrator. In addition, I have found that traditional design history is often discussed through the material 'object' alongside the identity of the *designer*, and if time permits, some social/contextual analysis of the object/designer. Again, in this model the *illustration* student may be ill-served by the secondary-sourced staging of 'the illustrator' as subservient or playing an overly simplified role in design and the cultural changes in the material 'value' of the illustration within print, mass and virtual reproduction, all of which require nuanced critique in the curriculum.

I would also add that the contemporary need for a general (or specialist) grounding in history has come under renewed debate through the multiple impacts of a palpable decline in historical literacy from changes in British high school curriculum, the plurality of perspectives on offer in a digitally networked

space that in turn helps to problematize the politics of traditional Grand Narratives (of any field) and the ongoing compression of classroom time with the growth in illustration student numbers and the need to develop the skills that will successfully equip and admit graduates to the workforce (editor's note: see Crean, also in this issue).

This brings us to the introduction of theory (alongside or on top of history) within the curriculum. Given that there exists no one definitive theory for visual arts or design, programmes have the opportunity and responsibility to take a position on which theories should be taught to their students. A detailed mapping of theory's purpose and impact on illustration practice is a separate article in itself. Here I will only chart some common approaches that I have seen in my experience as an academic and as a British academic external examiner. When considering the role of theory in illustration, I would argue that there are three clear territories:

1. Theories that relate to the comprehension and creation of language (Plato, Rene Descartes, John Locke), which normally include some detailed work on semiotics (Ferdinand de Saussure, Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes).
2. Theories that help critically elucidate content via some kind of European discourse analysis (Michel Foucault, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, John Dewey, Nicolas Bourriaud), and where time permits, an introduction/boot camp on twentieth-century philosophy.⁴

3. Theories that relate to publication and reception (Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, Donna Haraway, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Lev Manovich).

The pitfalls in delivering these theories (alongside the history) are that students may feel very compressed for time to reflect and learn, especially if they have not been shown examples of theory in visually applied practice. New conceptual terminology typically makes students anxious because it is intrinsically intellectually stretching and, depending on how it is delivered, often students may not see or be convinced of how theory can directly relate to their illustration practice. My stance has been to develop curricula that will adequately survey key histories and a selection of theory, but ultimately focus on the value of human relations and social context (see the case that I make for the Pragmatist Illustrator in 'Current conditions'). This approach is a reorientation away from the field of art or design history and the critical theory 'boot camp' mode towards a deeper awareness of contextual, social, popular and participatory structures. The added benefit of this approach is its inbuilt prompt to discuss the contemporary human experience of the potential audience and the student. This comes with the added benefit of helping students develop their professional social skills.

Current conditions

Today's British higher education funding conditions overtly expect universities to be instruments used for economic gain. For some institutions this seems to herald a need to revert to a more commercial and business skills orientation; for others, it has meant attempting an economic defence of the academe as an

environment in which exploration, dispute and deconstruction can be and should be encouraged while still being monetized.⁵

I would argue that illustration as a discipline is potentially better placed than many subjects in higher education to weather this new funding pressure – after all, the modern illustrator (akin to a musician) is arguably an example of the challenging ‘liquid modern’ condition in which ‘flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs’ (Bauman 2000 p97). For graduate illustrators there has never been an expectation of one stable ‘job for life’ (which ended with the waning ‘Golden Age’ of illustration by the 1970s). Rather, practicing illustrators have learnt through successive decades of social and technological change varied approaches to sustain freelance practice alongside other types of employment. This resilience (in the face of economic challenges) also now requires early-career illustration lecturers, who also need to be flexible, to meet the increased pressure to deliver the perceived quality and breadth of courses within contemporary illustration degrees (editor’s note: see Fauchon and Gannon, also in this issue).

The pragmatist illustrator proposition

Ideologically, as both a researcher and an educator, my perspective is in keeping with a pragmatic approach, which is counter to the Platonic ideal. In Platonic terms, opinion and knowledge are distinct, and the pursuit of true knowledge is an ascent – a betterment. In contrast, a pragmatist will use a variety of conceptual tools and methods (theories, histories) tailored to their own needs as required, where such variety is at odds with trust in a general master theory of truth/knowledge. This I argue better equips illustration students both for the

contemporary intersection of design and society, which sees illustrators becoming increasingly engaged with social, environmental and political agendas, and for better engagement with their culturally diverse peer group who now question the likes of white male dominance within the intellectual tradition.

In the pursuit of becoming more or meaningfully socially engaged, the illustrator, given the complexity of what social identity/interaction entails, is also better served by using a variety of tools, methods and theories. An interesting example of pragmatically multifaceted and socially engaged illustrative practice is Mick Peter's *The Regenerators* (2018). This project, commissioned for the Glasgow International Arts festival, is an 80-metre-long drawing that runs along the length of a gas purifier building in Dalmarnock, in the east end of Glasgow (Figure 2). In the research and development of the project Peter (who is also Programme Leader for Illustration at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee) collaborated with young people from Glasgow School of Art's Widening Participation team to generate the project concepts. The drawing itself is a humorous and careful comment on power, authority, change and urban regeneration in the city. It is also considerate in its selection of materials (a trademark of Peter's) as the work is printed on the paper used for billboards, a ubiquitous urban feature normally only associated with temporary utopian imagery used to obscure the building site behind the surface.



Figure 2: Mick Peter's *The Regenerators* (2018). Image credit: Keith Hunter.

Another example of innovative practice that seeks to illustrate complex human experiences is Rebecca Davies' and Eva Sajovic's *People's Bureau*, which ran in the Elephant and Castle shopping centre in London as a pilot in 2014 and again throughout 2016. Davies, an illustration graduate from the Glasgow School of Art, and Sajovic, a graphic design graduate from Central Saint Martins, describe the project as an 'installation' that sought to evidence and make visible the 'diversity of cultures, skills, networks and resourcefulness present in an area, currently undergoing a large-scale redevelopment that is likely to permanently displace local individuals, traders and organizations' (2014). The act of illustration within this project is both the facilitation and the initiation of skill-sharing workshops that ran out of the *People's Bureau's* bespoke shopping cart (Figures 3 and 4), and the bringing together of various films with tumblr and websites that documented and gave additional voice to the project (<https://www.peoplesbureau.co.uk>).



Figure 3: *People's Bureau* operated from a customized trader's cart, inspired by the Schiaparelli pink (after Elsa Schiaparelli) repaint project that the shopping centre and market underwent in 1991.



Figure 4: Detail of *People's Bureau's* tarot card workshop. For more documentation of the workshops see <http://peoplesbureau.tumblr.com>.

In terms of considering implementation of the pragmatist approach in illustration programme design, one should bear in mind that the pragmatist approach is not an easier option academically. It is not a smorgasbord of methods that get braided together – rather, it requires a level of critical discipline whereby one can learn enough of the various theories, and yet can also move on to other arguments and schools of thought as and when needed, and then put these tools into creative action. Knowing what you *need to know* is the bigger intellectual task and one that needs inculcating directly through the supervision of both studio and theory/history work. Having a keen sense of purpose, what type of illustrator one is and what one wants their illustrative practice to do makes being a pragmatist much easier and as such can only

normally be achieved in the senior years of study as professional and creative confidence and creative identity/ies are formed.

In 2015 the designer and writer Lara Furniss noted that 'since 2000, design practice in the UK has changed dramatically. Boundaries between design disciplines have dissolved, and many contemporary design studios now defy classification' (2015). The Decorators collective (<http://www.the-decorators.net>) can be regarded as an example of the multi-disciplinary turn occurring within the applied design sector. Its members have backgrounds in landscape architecture, interior design and psychology, and their mantra is that context is half the work whilst their aim is 'to help create good public spaces; spaces where difference meets and community is built'.

One of the most significant professional challenges that an illustrator will face is, like other design professionals, the need to work and collaborate across disciplines and domains. In the studio environment a pragmatic approach can be extended through collaborative discussion, in which faculty and students can learn to be culturally 'porous' and open to the unexpected and emergent. For example, quite distinct from their teaching staff, the current generation of students have significantly globalized and diverse peers, many of whom they will never meet because their connection is online. They also have a lived experience of the 'always on' influence of technologies such as 24/7 news, and as such could be encouraged to critique popular communication practices. In such discussions, this means giving more autonomy to the student to present their own direct lived experience as a viable research context alongside other more 'academic' perspectives. I have found through my teaching of contextual studies that this works well in half-day or two-hour workshops with groups of fifteen to 25 in

which faculty use questions or prompts to frame and drive the discussions.

Introducing notions such as 'freedom and sin' within digital media (Aceti and Leishman 2013) or 'mental pollution' (Sontag 1977 p24) are interesting critical propositions for illustrators to work through ethics, social spaces and their agency as makers and consumers of culture.

Professional confidence

"The by-product of adaptability and acceleration, elasticity means being able to negotiate change and innovation without letting them interfere excessively with one's own rhythms and goals." (Antonelli 2008 p14)

Within my department's illustration programmes, I have recently seen students ⁶ experiment with strategies for the decoding of mediated languages, ultimately developing their own finely tuned media literacy. In their studios they often discuss the power of the mental image: the power of that which the eye has seen and how it imprints into our memory (a considerable loosening from the traditional context for their practice where illustration is book-bound), and they acknowledge that potential associated 'text' now comes in various technological forms and can include other sensory elements, such as sound.⁷ Given the contemporary social climate, many students want to air and discuss the problems of liberal pluralism in the face of mass-mediated mainstream visual culture. Unlike many of us academics, they tend to be agnostic regarding the algorithmically steered search images and the impact of their deluge of digitally mediated images (moving and still). Many respond by making deeply context-specific, well-researched and hand-bound books as a tonic for, or to highlight,

popular culture tendencies. Self-publishing is now a naturalized notion for these students and often relates to the activism/community work discussed above. These books can give voice to the unheard.

If the pragmatist illustrator engages with the multi-faceted 'now', they will also see in popularist digital social communities the evolution of perpetually emergent languages such as 'the new aesthetic' (a collation/investigation of technologically enabled image processing), 'machine vision' (whereby a computer can recognize and evaluate images) and 'selfie culture' (the act of taking and sharing a consuming photographic self portraiture over social networks). The old dynamic of content broadcasters with their definitions of 'hot' or 'cold' media (McLuhan 1964) has been made infinitely more complex: the Internet is deemed to be both very hot and cold simultaneously, for instance (Wesch 2015; Kelly 2005).

As discussed above, as a field we can claim some inbuilt resilience as a proto 'liquid modern' identity, but we also have another source of strength: we are a design practice that has the ability to work to a problem or to a self-initiated project. This ability to practice independent of an externally determined problem or 'industry' is incredibly useful both commercially⁸ and ethically. In my teaching I argue that illustration, like art practice, can be used as discourse; it can be used to explore a more active technological facilitation – an extension of our editorial tradition, now disseminated across more fluid virtual structures. As a field we can also add to or problematize the self-objectification of selfie culture by producing new imagined images of self, or authoring confabulated or autobiographical narratives.

Illustrators can now more than fulfil the function of radar or 'early alarm system' traditionally bestowed on the artist. Ezra Pound (via McLuhan 1964 p6) describes this as the act of articulating emerging social and psychological subject matter(s), which by sharing these speculative subjects in a public sphere potentially enable society to better prepare itself to deal with said subject matter(s). Political theorist Ben-Ishai warns that within liberal political discourse, citizens are often presented with an oversimplified 'autonomy as an individualistic ideal' (2012 p61).⁹ But, if one returns to some theories, all is not lost. Becoming an efficacious citizen on one's own terms can begin with a reappraisal of social structures. We are in an age where we need diverse commentary and expression. Friedrich Nietzsche's proposal of 'perspectival seeing', taken up in phenomenology and postmodernist thought, may be a fruitful approach:

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity' be. (1887: III, 12 original emphasis)

Perspectival knowing states that experience and reason are only possible through one's own perspective and interpretation. It highlights the irreplaceable value of each individual and the value of differences and diversity. Following on from 'perspectival seeing', Richard Rorty (1989, 1999) posits a notion of self-creation, where to create oneself anew is a matter of fashioning oneself, an

‘enabling narrative’ as a better form of autonomous citizenry in which one displays one’s own ‘final vocabulary’. I would argue that illustrators as communication designers are particularly equipped to develop ‘constellations of terms, concepts, and expressions to convey one’s own-most hopes, fears and aspirations’ (Rorty as cited in Conway 1997, p128), and in doing so via richer perspectival seeing, they help counter the tendency towards heteronomic culture wherein individuals obediently abide by norms that are largely impersonal (e.g. beauty ideals) and for the most part culturally inherited (e.g. capitalism, sexual identity).

More eyes different eyes

Rick Poyner, at the *Illustration Research Conference* (2015), called for educational systems to better foster activism and discussed the conference theme of illustrator as ‘public intellectual’, stating that it is not enough to only create images with a sense of purpose or to speak as an academic to other members of the academe. Rather, illustrators need to be ‘thinkers, writers, debaters, interventionists, public speakers and campaigners able to articulate a clear, consistent vision’ (Poyner in Kiley 2015). Poyner quite correctly points out the dangers of the entropic loops of addressing only insiders that both the professional illustrator and the ‘academic’ illustrator can and often do fall into, in which genuine impact on visual culture or mainstream debate can be significantly diminished.

I have argued above that a porous pragmatic approach is best inculcated within a higher education environment – where thinking is seen as a tool (to potentially give back through teaching, to nourish ourselves creatively, to

express the challenges to our existence) in conjunction with our mark-making tools. Good contemporary illustration education that balances material training and theoretical training can equip our illustrators to see and speak through a form of 'perspectival seeing'. A modern illustrator should be conversant in current sociopolitical attitudes and be able to create and publish into the public domain their own independent thought and vocabulary. Furthermore, the larger international discipline of illustration could be re-appraised as a live and emergent multi-faceted community of 'different eyes'. After all, ours is a network of uniquely articulate individuals who disseminate new vocabularies (as enabling self-narratives or as part of a commercial project brief). Together we can form a chorus of affective voices and eyes, fostering new discourse and perspectives, which in turn beget new perspectives and debate.

Appendix A: Organizations supporting integrated theory and practice and illustration research

ICON is a bi-annual international illustration conference.

See: <https://theillustrationconference.org>.

CONFIA is an annual international conference on illustration and animation.

See: <http://www.confia.ipca.pt/>.

'Mokita Illustration Forum' (initiated by Roderick Mills and Darryl Clifton) is a curated event platform for critical debate around the subject of illustration. See: mokita1.blogspot.com/.

Illustration Research is a network of academics and practitioners 'with the purpose of promoting the cultural significance of illustration, and to create opportunities to share research into and through illustration'. It is also the

originating body of *The Journal of Illustration*. See:

<http://www.illustrationresearch.co.uk>.

VaroomLab is a more academically focused sister publication that was born out of *Varoom*, the Association of Illustration's (AOI) magazine.

See: <http://theaoi.com/varoom-mag/varoomlab> and

<https://theaoi.com/varoom/>.

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Notes

¹ Applied or commercial arts (c. 1850–present) as distinct from fine art practice.

Applied art is allied to commercial contexts; this sees illustration being used in publishing, advertising and marketing, but can also include more decorative

² The belief that commercial practice requires only vocational training is often influenced by technical schools offering diplomas and the steady migration of diplomas into degree subjects after a succession of British governments valuing of vocational education. Historical context available here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocational_education (accessed 4 August 2018).

³ Post-1992 ‘modern’ universities or ‘New Universities’ refers to former polytechnics and central institutions that were given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992.

⁴ Some examples of key twentieth-century philosophers often drawn upon by Visual Communication scholars: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone De de Beauvoir and John Dewey.

⁵ Interesting attempts to defend the need for ‘academic’ exploration, deconstruction, etc., which can also be monetized, have been made and remain professionally vital. See: Rajendran (2018) alongside Red Brick Edinburgh University’s student information page: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development/postgraduate/taught/learning-resources/critical> (accessed 4 August 2018).

⁶ For examples of graduate work see Kaitlin Mechan’s *St Valery* (2018) – telling the moving story of her grandfather Frank O’Hare’s WWII experiences in the battle of St Valery. See: <https://kaitlinmechan.myportfolio.com/st-valery-book> (accessed 4 August 2018); *Psyche* by Lucy Grainge and Juliette Duffy (2017).

⁷ In conventional editorial illustration the key text is located adjacent to the illustration. With new media formats, however, the text can now be considered in more fluid ways, in the form of voice-overs, music overlays, webpage comments sections, Tags..

⁸ Personal projects tend to be where the illustrator evolves their practice. Via social media, the illustration can gather more diverse and expanded audiences. This could be seen as a more fluid and unpredictable form of self-marketing – as the illustration gets shared and re-shared commercial interest normally follows.

⁹ The topic of fragmentation as a threat to social cohesion or the struggle to belong in twenty-first-century societies is a major trend within the field of sociology. See: <http://www.rc21.org/en/> (accessed 4 August 2018).